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Ascension

Jennifer Grace Brooks
Iowa State University

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Ascension

by

Jennifer Grace Brooks

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart, Major Professor
Jane Davis
Steffen Schmidt

Iowa State University

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2007

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ABSTRACT

Cybil has a normal life. She has a good job at Federal Express, a great boyfriend, and a close friend. When her former college roommate, Candice Warren, reappears with another one of her eccentric plans, Cybil must decide whether she should endorse Candice's political ambitions or to finally write her off as insane. From the colorful city of Memphis, TN to the subtropical island of Ascension, both Cybil and Candice find themselves in one of the most unique political situations ever.

Ascension

Jennifer Brooks

"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

“When I get back to the States, I don’t want to see you. You’ll have to find someone else to send on your wild goose chases.” Cybil says to Candice, walking toward the international gates in the Heathrow airport.

Part 1: Memphis

Chapter 1

Former hero Richard Jewel makes Americans question

September 3, 1996

ATLANTA, GA (CNN) – Former security guard turned hero is now being questioned in relation to the bomb that went off during the Olympic Games in July in Atlanta, GA. His fall from grace has many Americans questioning their own philanthropic efforts.

Cybil feels the cool whoosh of the wind from the sliding doors as she enters the Memphis International Airport. She always thought that airports were like small cities. Showers, food, wireless internet, security, what else would you need? Someone could just live here. She sees the bust of Danny Thomas as she walks to the middle of the lobby. It always looked like a lot of brown pieces of gum stuck together. The chairs are in the middle of the room.

The smells of coffees, cappuccinos, lattes, deep, dark Colombian roasts hits Cybil as she makes her way to the seats. And then she smells tea, chai, Earl Grey. Cybil is a tea drinker. She can't resist. She detours from the chairs and heads to the coffee shop. You always know what time it is in airports, Cybil thinks, glancing up at the arrival and departure screens. She turns her watch around on her wrist and looks at the time. She still has about thirty minutes before Candice's plane is due to arrive.

“Short tea, please.” Cybil orders as she steps up to the counter. The boy behind the counter takes a cup and fills it with hot water and hands it to Cybil. She pays and takes her cup to what she calls the seasoning counter where all the sugars, creams, cinnamon, caramel, and chocolate toppings are. She sticks her Lady Grey tea bag into her hot water and turns the honey bottle upside down over her cup. She stirs and sits down in the small café.

Cybil’s day had started out like it always does, although the day itself was strange. When she woke up, it was seventy degrees outside. It was now sixty-five. She dressed a little warmer than she had planned and headed out the door to work. Around nine o’clock, while sitting at her desk, drinking tea out of her Federal Express coffee mug, she got a phone call from Candice Warren, her college roommate.

“It’s good to hear from you.” Cybil said trying to remember the last time she talked to Candice. At least a year. She served as a character witness. Candice had participated in one of her protests and was accused of hitting one of the participants. He had a concussion. Turns out the guy fell. Cybil didn’t want to remember. Even though she wanted to be happy to hear from Candice, but she really just wanted to know what she wanted this time.

“What are you doing right now?” Candice asked.

“I’m at work, why, where are you?” Cybil thought this was an odd question. What were most people doing at nine a.m. on a Friday? She picked up her mug and sipped.

“I’m on my way to Memphis.”

Cybil almost dropped her mug; her arm decided to fall on its own. She hoped no one heard it knock against her desk and come running over, thinking something had broken.

“Hello?”

“I’m here. Um...wow.” Cybil felt she needed to respond to Candice’s news.

“Why?” Cybil closed her eyes. She meant to put it more...politely. She wanted to say *what brings you to Memphis*, but it came out too blunt.

“I’ll explain later. Can you pick me up? My flight lands at eleven eighteen.”

Can she pick her up? Cybil thinks. “What? Candice...I have things to do today...”

“All you have to do is pick me up. It’ll take two minutes.”

Cybil sighs.

“Everything’s set up for me. I just need a ride.”

“Alright.” Cybil had not looked at her schedule. She hoped she didn’t have a meeting around that time. She could take an early lunch or stay late.

“Oh, and one more thing.” Candice adds. “Do you mind if I stay with you?”

“Wait, what?” Cybil knows Candice is not the type to not have her plans laid out already. If she knew she was coming here, why didn’t she make arrangements? What if Peter comes over? It would be really awkward with Candice there. Cybil usually doesn’t do a lot after work, unless Peter comes over, but what if he comes over tonight?

Something must have happened to Candice; she was never like this.

“It’ll only be for a couple of days.”

Cybil is leaning toward believing her. Candice was always a good judge of time. She sighs. “Alright. I’m on my way.”

Cybil thinks that maybe Candice has learned to be more responsible since they graduated from college, but maybe she hasn't. In college, Cybil constantly had to bail Candice out of all the crazy situations she would get involved in. She would have to pick her up from police stations and men's houses. Cybil couldn't wait to rid herself of her responsibility, but lately, she's finding herself missing it.

"Great, see you then. Gotta go." Candice hung up. Cybil smiled at Candice's version of goodbye. All through college, Candice never said bye to anyone, she just announced she had to go, which was usually the case.

Cybil finishes her cup of Lady Grey. She feels warm and dreads to think what the temperature must be outside now. She listens to the sounds of heels clacking against the tile floor, luggage rolling, and zipper unzipping as passengers unload their laptops onto the belt leading to the x-ray machine. She hears the sloshing of change and keys. There is a hushed murmur of conversation occasionally broken by a screaming baby. There aren't a lot of people around, but the airport is still noisy. Maybe not such a great place to live.

Cybil feels her cell phone vibrating in her jacket pocket. She looks at the small screen on the outside. *Janae calling*. Cybil opens the phone and puts it against her ear.

"Hello."

"Hey, where are you? I called your office, no estas aqui." Janae has been falling asleep to Spanish CDs.

"I'm at the airport..."

“Whoa, what’s going on there? What are we doing for lunch today?” Janae has a habit of interrupting everyone. With all the excitement of Candice coming, Cybil had forgotten about lunch. They always ate lunch together unless one of them had a meeting.

“I’m picking up a friend. She’s gonna be in town for a few days.” Cybil really has no idea how long Candice plans on being in Memphis. “Meetings.” She adds, trying to provide some explanation.

“Cool. I’m craving Mexican. Sound okay?”

“Fine with me.”

“Well, hey, bring her along.”

“Well, she doesn’t really like Mexican,” Cybil says, despite the picture of all the Taco Bell bags in their trash can in college or the smell of refried beans that permeated the room every time Candice cooked. “She’s allergic.” Candice is Cybil’s responsibility; she doesn’t want her to pull Janae into whatever plans she has, too.

“Well, we can go somewhere else, Cybil.” Janae says, sounding as if she is playfully scolding a three year old. “Hey, why not let your friend pick the place?”

Cybil looks up and sees Candice’s tall, thin frame walking out of the security area. “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.” Cybil hangs up, thankful that Candice saved her from having to make more excuses. She didn’t know why she was doing this to her friend. Candice waves and points down to the floor, meaning she has to go downstairs to the baggage claim. She then shrugs and raises her eyebrows as if to say, “wanna come?” Cybil walks over and meets her at the top of the escalator. She wants to hug her, ask her how her flight was, tell her how good it is to see her, ask her if she wants some Rendezvous bar-b-que, the best in Memphis according to Cybil, but Candice is already a

step down on the escalator by the time Cybil steps on. The escalator is short, so Cybil doesn't catch up with Candice until they are on the ground floor.

Candice still has black, straight hair that stops past her shoulders and the same light brown skin. She has let the bangs she had in college grow out and her hair is parted on the left side. Her face seems gaunter to Cybil; it seems as if Candice is sucking on her cheeks, pulling them in. She looks thinner than Cybil remembered. Candice is turned forward, riding down the escalator.

"Cybil. You look good." Candice turns around and says. Cybil is struck by her beauty. Candice still has mocha colored eyes. She smiles at Cybil, a small business-like smile that barely spreads across her face. She then steps off the escalator. She moves her finger around in the air, trying to locate the belt where her luggage would come out. "Ah, here." She walks quickly over to baggage claim two, where her flight is listed.

Candice always walked so fast, but she never seemed to run. Cybil sometimes had a hard time keeping up with her and always ended up walking a step or two behind her. As such, Cybil was always more familiar with her back than her face. Cybil notices that Candice has maintained her hourglass figure, although she has plumped since college. She is wearing a red suit that fits her like a second skin. Who flies in a suit, Cybil wonders. She stands by Candice as the door opens and luggage comes rolling out.

"How have you been?" Candice asks. She does not smile as if the information Candice asked for was serious business. Cybil smiles at her inability to make small talk, to make people feel comfortable talking to her, something Cybil considers herself an expert at.

"I've been good. So, what brings you here?"

“Business.”

Cybil knows that this can mean any number of things for Candice; everything to her, from reading for class to petitioning for new activities during Homecoming to going to the movies, is business. She always had a way of shutting down conversation.

“How’s D.C.?” Candice has been living there for a few years. Cybil looks up at the ceiling, trying to count in her head. It has been eight years since they graduated and Candice went straight to law school in D.C.

“Crowded as always, but amazingly clean.” Candice walks up to pick her red suitcases off the belt. “It’s like we all live on top of each other.” She says, rolling them behind her.

“Do you need some help?” Cybil can’t help but ask even though she knows what her answer would be. Candice was always way too independent.

“No, I’ve got it.” Candice steps on the escalator to go back upstairs a second before Cybil does. “Where’d you park?” She turns to ask.

“On the upper level, straight out.” Cybil digs in her purse for her keys and retrieves them just as she steps off the escalator. “Are you hungry? You gotta be, you’re in Memphis, we’re all about food here.”

“I know. Don’t miss it a bit.”

Cybil’s eyes feel dry after walking through the exit with its familiar whoosh of air. It feels a few degrees cooler. Cybil hugs her jacket around her and hunches forward a little. Candice walks with her back straight, as always. They walk in silence to rows of parked cars.

“I’m right here.” Cybil hits the keyless entry button, unlocking the doors and flashing the lights on her ’90 Lexus.

Candice gets in and is on her cell phone before Cybil drives out of the parking lot.

“Hey, I’m here.” She says into her phone. “Where am I going?”

Cybil wonders who she is talking to, what she’s talking about. Did she come here and not know where she was going? Candice is not that short-sighted. Cybil turns on the radio. Candice puts her phone down in her lap and scrolls down her contact list. She settles on one, hits the call button, and returns the phone to her ear.

“I’m here.” She says.

Cybil turns down the radio so that she can barely hear it. Phil Collins confesses that he’s “in too deep.” Genesis.

“I’ll call you later with details.” Candice says.

Then Cybil’s cell phone rings. She doesn’t even look at the caller id on the outside.

“Hello.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” She hears Peter’s voice ring out clearly on the other side. He must be back from his interview in Washington, D.C. Since they started dating two months ago, Peter has been looking for another job.

“Hi.” Cybil says, letting out a huge sigh. She holds the receiver of the phone close to her chin and tilts her head towards Candice.

“So everyone will be there?” She hears Candice ask.

Will be where? Cybil wonders. Is Candice renting a car to get to wherever she’s going?

“What are you doing?” Cybil hears Peter ask. He sounded as if he has been repeating this question one too many times.

“Just picking up...a friend,” why is Cybil unsure of what to call Candice? “From the airport.”

“Gotta go.” She hears Candice finish her conversation. Candace places her phone in her bag.

“Who is it?” Peter asks, loud. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Cybil says. She wants to say something curt and hang up. She never mastered that skill, but she forces herself every now and then to be short with people the way Candice is. “I’ll...call you later.” Cybil hangs up.

Chapter 2

Graceland packed out for the King

Thousands pay tribute to the Rock legend

September 4, 1996

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (CNN) – Final numbers from the birthday celebration of Elvis Presley last month show that the King has not left the building. Officials from Graceland report that Presley's home received a record number of visitors in August.

Candice is staring out the window. Cybil isn't in the mood for small talk anymore, but the silences are too awkward. How can they sit in silence and be best friends? Cybil wants to stare at Candice, just watch her. She sits with her hands touching in her lap. Her knees are together and point toward Cybil. Cybil realizes that Candice is bare legged.

"Look familiar?" Cybil asks as they pass mile markers on the expressway. There was never much out this way, not until they passed Nonconnah. "It was always dead out here." There are never as many cars on 240 past the Nonconnah exit.

"It's the city." Candice says, not taking her eyes away from the window.

"At one point, I thought they were going to build something out here." Cybil presses the gas pedal harder. "Nonconnah," she announces, "back to civilization." Cybil

smiles a bit, meaning her remark as a joke; Candice didn't appear to be amused. Cybil is wondering why she is failing so miserably at making conversation. Why weren't they just clicking, the way friends do? "The Adam's Mark." She announces as they pass the tall hotel tower on Poplar Avenue. Next would be that huge Evangelical church and then the I-40 exit. The grass is greener on the side of the road; there are small houses lined up next to each in the distance. Cybil can see the backyards with swing sets, grills, fences. She presses the gas in order to merge onto I-40; she figures Candice must be tired and not feel like talking.

They continue down I-40, passing the old Celebration Station and Wal-Mart on Sycamore View.

"They use the Wal-Mart as a haunted house on Halloween." Cybil says.

"I remember." Candice says. They continue until the Germantown Parkway exit. Cybil puts on her right blinker to exit.

"This is all new." Cybil says as they exit. Since the mall opened, land had been cleared for new stores, restaurants, and hotels. Cybil turns away from the mall and makes the first left on Rockcreek Parkway and pulls in front of her apartment building.

She gets out and opens the trunk and lifts the smaller of Candice's two suitcases. Her arm jerks back; it is lighter than she thought. Maybe Candice is really only staying a few days. If so, why two suitcases?

"I got it." Candice says, taking the suitcase from Cybil and pulling up the handle so she could roll it behind her. She walks ahead of Candice to open the door.

"Well, this is it." Cybil walks to the middle of her living room and turns around as Candice rolls her luggage across the threshold. "C'mon in."

“You’ve certainly done alright for yourself.” Candice says, sitting on the couch. “But you work at FedEx, why are you still renting?” Candice looks up at Cybil, expecting an answer. “I would have expected you to settle down, buy a big, two-story house...” She trails off.

“I like where I am.” Cybil says definitively. It is the only thing she can think to say. She knew it wasn’t entirely true, but did that make it a lie? Of course, Cybil wants to settle down, eventually. But lately, she feels already settled. Her only excitement is getting drunk with Peter. But Candice didn’t need to know that. Cybil turns and walks to her pantry, opens the door and looks in. “There’s plenty to eat...” Cybil pokes around the shelves, rearranging her boxes of macaroni and cheese, instant oatmeal, and tea bags. She knew what came next; usually when someone says ‘there’s plenty to eat,’ they usually follow that with ‘if you’re hungry,’ but she had already asked this. It feels weird to leave the phrase hanging out there, though, like bait on a fishing line. Cybil decides to change the subject. “Make yourself comfortable.” She then looks at her watch. One o’clock pm. “I’ve got to get back to work.” Cybil looks in the pantry once again, hoping that something quick and tasty would jump out at her, but it doesn’t. She shuts the door. “Don’t worry about dinner. I’ll call you later. See you tonight.”

Outside, Cybil shuts her car door and decides to put this whole Candice issue behind her. The wind blows, stirring up the fallen leaves on the ground. They make a crackling noise and settle. She couldn’t let it get to her. Her schedule will remain the same. Cybil usually gets up at seven a.m. every morning and is out the door by 7:45 and to work by 8:30. She usually takes her lunch promptly at noon and returns to her desk at

one p.m. and leaves at five on the dot. She gets home by 5:45 and eats dinner around 6:45. She goes to bed around eleven p.m. and does the whole thing again the next day.

Cybil can see one of the chairs to her kitchen table is angled to the side when she arrives home at 5:45 p.m. Candice must have been sitting there. She can smell her vanilla perfume, light and sweet. She picks up a piece of paper left on the table and recognizes Candice's small, fat handwriting.

Nigeria → Ascension n 2 weeks

NASA site, Ariane

Seabird Restoration Project

Oklahoma City-another bomb?

Just as Cybil finishes reading and lowers her hand to the table, Candice walks in.

"Hey, what's going on?" Candice says, walking around the corner to the kitchen where Cybil is standing. She has on a pair of jeans and a red, short sleeved shirt with a plunging neckline. Her smile fades. "Where did you get that?"

"It was here."

"Did you read it?"

"Well, yeah, I wanted to know what it said."

"Give it to me." Candice holds her hand out, takes the note from Cybil and reads it.

"What's on it?" Cybil asks, confused by the silence.

"How long have you had this?" Candice takes a step forward.

"I just found—"

"Did you show it to anyone?"

“No, Candice, what is going on?”

Candice exhales. “Have a seat.”

Cybil sits.

“What do you know already?”

Cybil thinks for a moment, then shakes her head. Is she supposed to know something? “Nothing.”

Candice sits.

“Alright, so. One of my clients is Derrick Cartwright, the senator from Michigan. He’s trying to get a bill passed in Congress that would provide supplies to Rwandan refugees in Zaire. While he was researching the situation in Rwanda, he came across...”

Candice pauses.

“What? What did he find?”

“Well, that our government has been ripping off African nations.” Candice pauses. “So I’m here investigating.”

“But why here?”

“There’s a group here that Derrick is connected with. He sent me here to work with them.” Candice shifts in her seat. “I’m trusting you with a lot.” Candice swallows.

“I need something to drink.” Cybil says, getting up. She pours two glasses of water.

“Water?” Candice holds the glass up to her face. Cybil raises her eyebrows.

“You’re gonna need something more than this.” Candice gets up and opens Cybil’s refrigerator. She bends at the waist, pushing bottles around. “No liquor?” Candice stands up. “Cyb, what’s happened?”

Cybil contemplates this question. They were both hard drinkers in college.

“Peter usually brings the beer.” Cybil says. “So what is this scam thing?” Cybil takes a sip of her water.

“Oh someone new?” Candice asks, raising her eyebrows.

“You could say that.”

“Well, I’m gonna meet with them tomorrow night. You should come.” Candice says.

“What, why?”

“To hear the rest of the story.”

“Listen, I don’t know if I want to get involved in this.” Cybil takes a sip of water. “I mean, I don’t know anything about governments.”

“You already are involved. You know more than you think.”

“This isn’t a letter writing campaign. We’re not kids anymore.” Cybil says. She slides down in the chair, stretches her legs out in front of her and crosses her left ankle over her right. “What if it doesn’t work, what if you don’t find anything?”

“C’mon Cyb, you know me, I always find something. I’ll admit I made a lot of mistakes in the past, but I work for a senator now, if I mess up, he takes the fall.” Candice leans over the table. Cybil can see the swells of her breasts. She sighs. “I can do this.” Candice says.

“That’s what you said about all the protests, remember? Health care, taxes, Reagan, it never stopped, Candice. How many times can I bail you out?”

Candice sighs. "I know you don't believe me, but it's different this time." Candice sits back.

"How?"

"Well, it's not just me. And Derrick can get me out, you don't have to."

Cybil sighs. "Why do you need me?"

"You're someone I know I can trust. Peter thinks really highly of you."

"Peter who? How do you know Peter?" Was this her Peter, or someone else?

Cybil doesn't recall telling her about him.

Candice's cell phone rings. She pulls it out of her jeans pocket and flips it open.

"I'm bringing someone in...she's good...I can't give that out...she'll be with me tomorrow...I'm telling you she's good...just tell the guys."

Chapter 3

Intel expected to remain at the forefront of flash memory

September 5, 1996

San Jose, California (CNN) – Santa Clara based company Intel is leading the industry in flash chip memory sales. Flash memory chips allow cell phones, laser printers, and computers to retain their settings even when they are turned off.

Cybil gets up on Saturday morning and goes to work. Monday is Labor Day and she doesn't want to get behind. That's what she tells Candice, trying to get Candice to view her as a responsible, hard-working adult. But she really needed a place to think. Although Candice left a little before she did, Cybil feels like Candice permeates her apartment too much. Her perfume lingers in the room like old coffee. Her loofah hangs from the shower nozzle, always dripping wet.

Cybil gets to FedEx around nine a.m. and plans to leave by twelve. Her office is very quiet. She jumps when she hears the keyboard click as she logs on. Cybil has a story to finish for the upcoming week's *Briefs*. She clicks open Microsoft Word and begins to type; however, she doesn't get past the title before she begins to think about Candice.

She always had ideas like this. Should she try to find out more about what she's doing or just let it go? She's never let anything that Candice does go before. A part of Cybil wants to blow this joint and follow Candice, while another part wants to lecture her about basic etiquette. You don't just show up in someone's life and demand...everything. This time, it did sound more legitimate; she's working for a senator. Cybil picks up the phone and dials Peter's number. She has to get out of her head for a while.

"You're at work? Why?" He asks. Cybil hears other male voices in the background.

"Got a lot on my plate."

"What are you doing later on?"

Cybil sighs. "Nothing. I'm gonna leave here around twelve and go home and wait for you."

"Kinda bold, aren't you? Who says *I* don't have anything to do today?"

Cybil twirls the phone cord around her fingers. "You don't have anything to do today."

Peter hushes the guys in the background. "And how do you know that?"

"You're not doing anything right now."

"Well, yeah, right *now*."

"You won't be doing anything later on either." Cybil smiles.

"What makes you say that?"

"A girl is basically telling you that if you come over, you're gonna get some. You're a smart guy."

"You're finally right about something. I'll be over around five."

Cybil hangs up and starts typing again. Why is she here on a Saturday? Peter sounded like he is having fun. Candice is somewhere in one of her numerous “meetings.” Where’s Janae? Maybe Cybil should just go to this meeting; it may settle a lot of things for her.

Cybil gets home around 12:30. She isn’t finished with her article, but how could she concentrate on that after talking to Peter? Candice is still not there. When would she be coming back? What if she comes back while Peter is over? Cybil picks up her cell phone and dials Candice’s number; she does not answer. Of course, when Cybil really needs to talk to her, Candice is unavailable. She has a few hours before Peter is supposed to be there. Cybil turns on CNN, hoping to somehow feel closer to Candice. She is probably watching the same thing, wherever she is.

Peter comes over promptly at five. Afterwards, they lie on their backs, staring at the ceiling. Cybil is inhaling the strong, yet sweet smell of Peter’s Cool Water cologne. She notices that not only does she smell it on him, but on herself as well. She thinks about Peter’s red hair that covers his body in a thin layer and how it tickles her skin.

“Remember that government job I applied for?” Peter turns his head toward Cybil.

“Yeah.”

“They made me an offer.”

“Are you going to take it?” Cybil turns her head.

“I think so.”

Cybil returns her gaze to the ceiling. Although she has only been seeing Peter for about two months, she's sad. They told each other that their relationship was nothing serious, but now Cybil wants to say that it is.

Cybil hears keys in the door. Candice must be here. Oh great. She always had great timing.

"You'd better put something on." Cybil tells Peter, throwing the covers off her body.

They both get up. Peter puts on the jeans and t-shirt he came over in while Cybil ties her robe around her waist. She walks out of her bedroom with Peter behind her and meets Candice in the hallway.

"Oh, hi." Candice starts and then looks up to Peter's eyes. "Hello."

Cybil looks down, thinking the smell will give her and Peter away.

"Hi." Peter responds.

"Candice, this is Peter Wiley. Peter, this is my college roommate Candice Warren."

"Wait, you're Candice Warren?" Peter asks.

"Peter Wiley, it's nice to finally meet you." Candice says.

"Do you know each other?" This thought ran through Cybil's mind, but she didn't mean to say it out loud.

"Well, I've heard of Peter." Candice starts.

"The Capitol is like a small city." Peter says to Cybil. "When I was there interviewing, Candice's name got tossed around a bit. She's one of Derrick's top."

Candice smiles.

Cybil shifts her gaze between Candice and Peter.

How do Candice and Peter know each other? Where did they meet? Peter had just gotten back. This is the first time Cybil has seen him since he's been back. If Candice works for a senator, does that mean that Peter will be, too?

"Well, I'll leave you two." Candice says and walks to the guest room. She closes the door behind her. Cybil doesn't want her to go, but knows that it is too awkward for her to stay.

Chapter 4

James Earl Ray didn't do it?

New theory of King Assassination surfaces

September 6, 1996

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (CNN) – New evidence has surfaced that may exonerate James Earl Ray, the man convicted of assassinating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel downtown. King's top advisors, Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton, have been questioned regarding this new evidence.

Robert comes to pick up Candice and Cybil on Sunday for the meeting.

“Robert this is Cybil, Cybil this is Robert Birch.” Candice says.

Robert holds out his hand and Cybil shakes it. He looks her in the eye. He is a touch darker than Candice with curly hair and smooth skin.

“Well, we should go.” Candice says, breaking the silence.

They walk outside and get into Robert's white Audi. Candice and Robert begin talking the way that couples talk. Cybil feels a bit left out, sitting in the back seat, watching the shadows the streetlights make in the car.

“What'd you do today?” Candice asks, once they have left Cybil's apartment complex.

“Not much, did some checking.”

“Oh, yeah, what’d you find out?”

“Derrick was right...” Robert says to Candice.

“About the island?”

Gary and Josh are already at Robert’s when they arrive. Josh has a laptop in his lap and Gary is leaning in, looking at the screen. They seem to enter in the middle of a conversation; Gary and Josh become quiet as Robert shuts the door.

Gary is very dark-skinned with barely any hair. Cybil first notices his high cheek bones and botchy complexion. He’s shorter than Robert, about Cybil’s height.

Josh is white, blond hair, brown eyed. He walks on his toes and seems to fit between Robert and Gary’s height. He’s the middle height one. If they were to stand in a row, they would look like pipe organs.

“Hey.” They both say at the same time. They look up at Candice, Cybil and Robert entering the house.

“Um...this is...” Robert fishes for Cybil’s name.

“Cybil.” Candice says.

Gary and Josh are silent.

“Have a seat.” Robert motions towards the leather sofa. Cybil sits, leaving space between her and Gary.

“Hey, Rob, this laptop is sweet.” Josh says.

“Don’t download any porn and you can use it.” Robert says, rolling his eyes at his nickname.

“What are you looking at?” Candice asks walking over to the tan leather sofa they were sitting on.

“Checking to see how Derrick’s bill’s doing.” Josh says.

“I’m his lobbyist. I can tell you it’s stuck.”

“Can we talk to you for a minute?” Gary says, looking up at Candice. “In private.” He adds, glancing at Cybil. The others turn and look at her.

“Let’s talk in the kitchen.” Candice says. “We’ll be back in a second.” She tells Cybil.

The guys walk into the kitchen, which has a door on it that swings back and forth. When it swings back and forth for the last time as Robert disappears into the kitchen, Cybil can hear parts of their conversation. She looks around, thinking Robert’s living room looks so dark. She was never comfortable on leather furniture. They’re either too cool or too warm. The light is very dim, which makes ordinary objects like lamps and tables cast shadows on the walls.

“Candice...gonna...work?” She hears Gary say.

“She’s...not...us...” Cybil recognizes that voice as Josh’s.

“Listen, guys...” She hears Candice say. “Don’t you think...thought...through already?”

Cybil tucks her hands under her thighs. How long is this going to last?

“How...trust her?” Gary says.

There is silence. Cybil leans over and looks at Robert’s laptop. Congress’s website is up. There’s a lot of writing, a list of phrases. Cybil skims. *Troops to*

Zaire...Middle East. Cybil glances at the bottom and sees the word *Ascension*. She wonders what this is.

“Alright...done?” Candice asks.

Cybil hears footsteps in the kitchen. She hears a whoosh of air coming from the kitchen door and immediately straightens up. Candice, Robert, Josh, and Gary come back into the living room and sit down.

“Alright so. Where are we?”

“Think we’re just about done.” Gary says, glancing at Cybil. “We gotta get there as soon as possible.”

“We should catch Cybil up.” Candice says, getting up and grabbing some papers from her bag on the floor.

Get where? Cybil thinks.

“We don’t have time for that now.” Gary says. “Just pack light. Only what you can carry in one bag.”

“What? Why?” Cybil looks at Candice for answers. Candice looks at Gary. She must know; she wouldn’t have come here if she didn’t know every detail. Cybil just has to get Candice to tell her.

Josh looks at Gary and begins taking his cues. “Make that the most necessary things. Like food, water, warm clothes that you can layer, comfortable shoes.”

“Where are you going?” Cybil asks.

Gary shakes his head and looks at Josh.

“To Ascension.” Josh furrows his eyebrows. “I thought Candice told—“

Gary elbows Josh.

Cybil looks around at Candice and Robert. “What’s going on?” She asks them.

“What Cybil is asking about is the details of our job once we get there.” Candice jumps in. “Basically, we are going to Ascension to—”

“Meet with a contact there.” Gary jumps in.

Cybil catches a glimpse of Robert, who has been sitting silently next to Candice the whole time.

After the meeting, Gary and Josh fall asleep lying on the floor. Robert is upstairs. Cybil wonders what he is doing, who these people are, and why they are leaving America.

“So what do you think?” Candice asks, sitting beside her on the sofa. She is turned toward Cybil, resting her head on the palm of her left hand.

“I don’t know, Candice. Why are you going with them?”

“That was Derrick’s decision, not mine.”

Cybil looks at her watch. She had called Peter to come pick her and he said he was on his way ten minutes ago. She can’t bring herself to get as comfortable on the sofa as Candice seems. How did they convince her to do this? From what Cybil remembers of Candice, she didn’t really need a lot of convincing, but hadn’t she been through enough schemes to be a little more skeptical?

“Do you trust them?” Cybil asks. They didn’t appear to trust her. If Candice says yes, then she is a lot more naïve than Cybil thinks she is.

“I trust them to do their jobs. That’s all we’re going to do, a job for Derrick.”

“I don’t know about this.” Cybil says, looking at her watch. Peter said he would be there as soon as possible. She didn’t want to stay here another minute. She doesn’t

even want to be around Candice right now. The light creates a shadow across her face. She is wearing black slacks and a black button down blouse with red stripes. The shirt fits Candice perfectly.

“How about the news?” Candice says, grabbing the remote from behind her and pointing it towards the television. Cybil stares past the screen at something else.

After a half hour, Candice gets up and goes upstairs. Now Cybil feels alone in this big house and Peter still has not come. Why did Candice leave her alone? Could she not see how uncomfortable she is? It’s almost ten o’clock. Did she want to ask Robert to take her home? She suddenly feels very sleepy; it’s almost her bed time. Her eyes are beginning to glaze over. Candice comes back downstairs.

“Hey, wake up.” Candice says sitting beside her. “Where’s Peter?”

Cybil swallows.

“Why not stay here? Tomorrow’s Labor Day. You gotta get used to us anyway.”

As Cybil goes upstairs, she notices the balcony overlooking the living room. Robert’s house is nice, but it seems big and empty to Cybil despite all the furniture. All of the furniture seems big and imposing. The banisters on both sides of the stairs are some type of smooth, dark wood that shined. Upstairs, there is a long, hallway with lots of doors. She goes into the bedroom with the big bed and fluffy comforter. It has a yellow background and a few flowers on it. There is a small dresser with a mirror on it and a natural colored wicker chair in the corner opposite the bed. Cybil thinks there is no way Robert could have picked this out. She takes her shoes off and is shocked by the softness of the carpet. Candice comes in. She ruffles through a bag on the floor. Just as she is turning to leave, Cybil calls her.

“Hey Candice.”

She turns around.

Cybil wants to ask about the guys. How she met them, where they are from.

“When did all this start?”

“All what?” Candice leans on the doorframe.

“This investigation stuff.”

“Well, for me,” Candice says coming into the room and sitting in the wicker chair, “it started with Oklahoma City.”

“Yeah, that was really sad.” Cybil says.

“Yes, but even more so, I think people aren’t taking the implications of the bombing seriously. Well, I guess before I go there, the whole story was not told.”

Candice crosses her legs.

“What do you mean, the guys were arrested who did it.” Cybil says.

“There were others that were involved that still have not been brought to justice. There was a third person present at the site, according to eye witness statements. Other people have claimed that the Ryder truck used in the bombing and McVeigh’s getaway car was seen at a military compound.” Candice looks straight at Cybil.

“You believe what a few people say versus what the official report was? What makes them reliable? I mean, people could have said anything.”

“Cybil, it’s not like they were interviewed years after the event. When the cops talked to them, it was right after. You know,” Candice looks around the room, “people want to be rational and measure reality by what they see, hear, touch or smell, but then when they see, hear, touch, or smell something, they immediately try to rationalize it

away.” Candice pauses and then looks at Cybil. “You should never doubt what you see.”

Candice pauses.

Cybil is struck by this remark. She was not sure what she saw or heard earlier. She remembers Candice telling her about some money being misplaced and then this stuff about meeting a contact somewhere. How can Cybil not doubt what she sees and hears?

“Let’s zoom out for a second and look at the larger picture,” Candice says.

“Americans bombed Americans. And not for the first time either. Oklahoma was our wake up call.”

“So you think it’s gonna happen again? Is that why you are leaving?”

“McVeigh and Nichols are associated with a radical militia that stocks up on guns. They believe the government killed people in Ruby Ridge and Waco to snuff out rebellion.” Candice says.

Cybil nods. “How do you know all this?”

“Well, I guess to answer your first question, yes.”

“Wouldn’t you need to tell everyone about this? If another bomb goes off…”

Cybil trails off.

“Would anyone believe us? Do you believe us?” Candice leans forward and looks at Cybil as if she is concentrating very hard on something.

Cybil thinks for a second. She doesn’t believe her. “It shouldn’t matter. You have an obligation.”

“The government has a bigger obligation to its citizens.” Candice says, sitting back in the chair. There’s no winning with her, Cybil knows that. She kind of liked this

about Candice; she really didn't have to think when Candice was around. She lays down on the bed.

“Where are you sleeping?”

“In Robert's room.”

“Oh.” A wide grin spreads across Cybil's face. Candice isn't wasting any time, but this means that Cybil won't see much of her.

“What?” Candice asks.

“Is he married?”

“What, no, what would make you ask that?”

“Look at this bedspread. And this house. There is no way a man picked this out.”

Cybil points at the bedspread. “I mean, what does he do, anyway?”

“Trial lawyer.”

Cybil looks around the room. “Then how did he get all of this?”

Just as Candice is opening her mouth to respond, Cybil hears Robert's voice from down the hall. “Candice.”

“Gotta go.” Candice says.

Chapter 5

***Mir* shuttle program going as expected**

September 7, 1996

HOUSTON, Texas (CNN) – Mission control in Houston, Texas has reported that the space shuttle *Mir* has experienced few errors. Launched last year, the shuttle has both American astronauts and Russian cosmonauts on board.

Cybil lies on her back in the bed and stares up at the ceiling. She always had trouble sleeping in new places. The alarm clock beside her bed makes soft, ticking noises, counting the seconds she is awake. She thinks about everything that was said earlier and how they all can be so convinced. What did they know that she didn't? Why didn't Candice tell her that she was leaving again?

Candice always did this type of thing in college. Always involved with some group or other trying to do something. They usually always made a small dent in something, just a small ripple that no one else felt but them, but they were satisfied with themselves.

But this wasn't college anymore. They have lives now, jobs, families, friends. On one hand, Cybil wishes Candice would grow up and stop trying to change the system and just live in it, but, on the other hand, she admires Candice's ability to be unattached.

Cybil is a bit afraid to go to sleep in this big house. She didn't hear any noises; they were all asleep. Her eyes begin to get heavy, but she forces them open. Then she hears hushed voices.

"What'd you think?" Gary says.

"...Don't think...find...sooner...later?" Josh asks. Cybil hears footsteps going down the stairs. "Shh..."

"Derrick...coming?" Gary asks.

"That makes...two...four...us."

"...go..." Cybil hears the front door open and close quietly.

The next morning, Cybil walks down the stairs and finds Josh in the kitchen eating a big bowl of Fruit Loops.

"Sleep well?" He asks.

"Alright, I guess." Cybil says as she looks around. Is this all there is to eat?

"Bowls are in the cabinet to your left, spoons in the drawer below. Milk in the fridge."

"Thanks." This isn't too far from what she ate in the mornings before work.

"Hope we didn't spook you last night."

Cybil smiles at him over her shoulder. Then she grabs the gallon of milk from the refrigerator and sits down opposite Josh. She still isn't quite comfortable with the whole idea, but she's got to watch Candice.

"So how long has this been going on?" Cybil asks, pouring some cereal into her bowl.

“Since before this country was founded, but it didn’t hit me until my freshman year of college.”

By the looks of Josh, it could not have been more than a few years ago.

“What changed you?” Cybil pours milk over her cereal and sticks her spoon in.

“Well,” Josh begins, “I’m from Philly and at Penn State there was this string of burglaries.” He takes a bite of his cereal. Cybil does also. “I worked security. It was an easy job; I got to talk to my friends most of the time. They kept me awake. So one night I’m on duty and I see this guy in a bomber jacket. I was like ‘who wears those,’ you know?”

Cybil nods.

“So I watched him for a minute. Wanted to see what he was doing. I followed him around. They got on me later about leaving my post, but nothing was happening there and if this was the guy, I thought they would kinda like me bringing him in.”

Cybil takes another bite of her cereal.

“So he’s walking behind all these dorms which makes me really suspicious. It was in the spring and it was pretty warm at night so people had their windows open. I saw him reach into one of the windows.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, I kept following him, but then he walked between these two dorms and I lost him. But I knew there was a little niche there that people hide in, so I kept walking. Well, I get closer and then he walks out. I ran into him!”

“This story again.” Cybil turns around to see Gary standing in the kitchen. She must have been so into Josh’s story that she didn’t hear him. “So what happened this time, you take him down in a blaze of glory?”

“We will continue this later.” Josh tells Cybil.

“Give him time to get the story straight.” Gary jokes as he opens the refrigerator.

“She was asking our origin stories, man. Care to share?”

“Oh, well in that case, I got his beat by a mile.” Gary says sitting down and pouring some Fruit Loops into a bowl. He pours milk in his bowl and takes a huge bite, so big that a few loops fall onto the table. “I used to have a day job. Got it right outta college. Claims adjuster. What a waste of ten years.”

Cybil puts her spoon down. Gary must be close to her age.

Gary takes another smaller bite. “Anyway, people are always filing crazy-ass reports like ‘the pole came out of nowhere’ or ‘I didn’t even see that parked car.’ Gary held his spoon. “After that, nothing was too hard to believe anymore.”

Cybil wants to ask him what made him leave, but Gary and Josh are laughing hard. Cybil smiles, thinking there must be some inside joke that she is not aware of. They seem to have fun together. Gary seems to be enjoying this plan thing. Cybil couldn’t dream of leaving FedEx even though she is getting tired of the place. But isn’t she about to leave? Cybil is shocked by how quickly she is considering following Candice. She feels that if she says no to Candice; she will have to sit in her fabric FedEx cubicle everyday, thinking about Candice and what she missed.

Robert and Candice come down the stairs. Robert first, and then Candice, patting both her shoulders with her hands. Robert has on a red, green, and black plaid robe and

he drags his feet over the kitchen floor. Candice looks radiant, although her hair is disheveled. The left side is pushed up and her eyes are amazingly bright. She has on a large t-shirt that flows past her hips and a pair of form-fitting sweat pants.

“Damn, man, you look like a butler or something.” Gary bursts out. He and Josh laugh. “He always has to look like he’s rich.” Gary says to Cybil, but Cybil is watching Candice reach up and touch one of the bowls in the cabinet, wrap her French manicured fingers around it, lift it free from the shelf and set it on the counter.

“Good morning.” Candice comes in after Robert, all smiles.

“Good morning.” Gary says in a high, female voice. He wiggles his fingers in a wave to Candice. Cybil doesn’t think Gary or Josh ever stopped laughing. Candice rolls her eyes at them.

Chapter 6

New AIDS drugs may prolong life

September 8, 1996

ATLANTA, GA (CNN) – The new AIDS drugs Ritonavir and Indinavir may help people with this disease live longer lives. Clinical trials have been successful; the first FDA approved home trials are to begin this year.

Cybil smells her spring breeze Bounce dryer sheets as she enters her apartment. Although she's only been gone a day, everything looks new. Her off white sofa seems brighter, the carpet cleaner. Maybe she got used to looking at Robert's browns and tans.

What has just happened? Cybil has just gone to a meeting in which leaving the U.S. was discussed. Should she go? It sounds crazy; she doesn't even know why they are leaving. When she looks at Candice, it seems easier to tell her yes, she will go. She's got to corner Candice and make her spill the plans. The guys don't seem as willing. Unfortunately, Candice stayed with Robert. Maybe she'll be back later tonight; if not, Cybil's going to call her. If anything, at least she will hear Candice's soft voice.

According to the plan, they were leaving in a week. If she decides to go, that leaves Cybil has little time to notify her boss and pack the few things she is allowed. Although she still thinks the idea is crazy, she isn't sure Candice can handle these guys

on her own. Cybil didn't even know if they liked her all that much. She is also curious about her relationship with Robert. On the one hand, she thinks it's good that she and Candice have someone in their lives. Maybe they can both settle down, or at least Cybil could. On the other hand, Cybil is jealous of Robert. He gets to lie next to her in the dark and watch her sleep.

Cybil walks to her end table in the living room and presses the play button on her answering machine. She hears Janae's mousy voice.

"Cybil, it's me, Janae. Hey, listen, this new movie that I've heard a lot about, *Grace of My Heart*, is opening next weekend, just wanted to know if you wanted to go. So give me a call, okay? Bye." The machine beeps. Cybil smiles, but then it fades as she realizes that Peter has not called her. Maybe he's just been busy.

Cybil's apartment feels silent. She turns on the television to hear some voices. She is surprised that she got used to living with other people that quickly.

Cybil turns on the news. She feels a little out of place, not knowing what is going on in the world.

The women's soccer team is going to be in the Olympics, police want to change drug seizure laws, Botswana wants the Bushmen to leave.

Cybil looks at her watch. 6:15. Strangely, Cybil is not hungry.

At work on Tuesday, Cybil looks up Ascension on the internet. She learns that the island is a British territory, but was discovered by the Portuguese on Ascension Day. There must be something special about this island. It's located south of the Equator in the Atlantic Ocean, and south of Nigeria. Candice's notes said something about Nigeria.

Ascension has a subtropical climate and two cities—Georgetown the capital and Two Boats. Cybil wonders where they are planning to stay. She should take some time and think about this. If she's going to go, it will be to make sure Candice is okay. They are planning on staying a week and she has a week of vacation time.

Cybil gets up and walks to her supervisor's office. She knocks on her boss's door, even though it is not closed. She is on the phone. She looks up and waves Cybil inside. She then hangs up. Cybil's knees buckle a little. Candice didn't come back last night. Maybe if Cybil did this, went with Candice, she could spend more time with her.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to take my vacation time next week." Cybil says.

"It's about time." Her boss says. "You're here everyday on the dot. I was beginning to think you didn't know how to take vacation." She smiles. "You taking the whole week?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Great, have fun."

Cybil almost skips back to her desk. FedEx didn't seem as dreary as it usually does for her. She plops down in her desk chair to the usual morning chatter about spouses, kids, and weekend plans. Her co-workers rarely did work at the office; Cybil would walk by and see instant messenger screens and Goldsmith's websites up. Cell phones constantly ring and people answered them whether they were business or not. They chat in the morning until about nine or nine thirty, between eleven and two o'clock, and from about four on. Sometimes this scheduled varies, but not very often. Cybil is sure that someone knows that she will not be here next week already. News and gossip

spread easily around the Corporate Communications department like warm butter over bread. Cybil didn't really talk to her co-workers about her personal life; she really only talked to Janae, who worked in building C, and Peter, recently.

Erika has put a draft of the *Sales Brief* and *Sales Manager's Brief* on her desk for her to proof. She sees Erika's curly handwriting in red ink across the page. She would expect this by the end of the day.

To waste time, Cybil opens the FedEx discount website. Because FedEx is such a huge company that employs a lot of people in Memphis, they can get discounts just about everywhere including discount airline tickets, gift certificates to restaurants, discounts on laptops, and a lot more.

In addition to the discount center, located in Building G, is the cafeteria and the workout room. There is also an outdoor track. Sometimes while on lunch, employees jog or walk around the track, circling the building. There are benches and flowers placed sporadically around, making the track very scenic. Cybil always feels locked in at work; with food, both an indoor and outdoor workout facilities, and discounts galore, there is no reason to eat, work out, or shop anywhere else. Many of the buildings were connected, so you rarely had to go outside. But Cybil feels a little freer today.

Chapter 7

Months later, authorities still dumb-founded about TWA Flight 800

September 9, 1996

CALVERTON, Long Island (CNN) – Almost two months after the tragic explosion of TWA Flight 800 authorities are still not closer to an explanation. The plane exploded off the Long Island coast on July 17.

They are set to leave in a week from today and Cybil is having second thoughts. She just couldn't bring herself to buy the idea that they were going to Ascension because they are meeting someone. Why can't that person come to the U.S.? Doesn't everyone want to come to the U.S.? Maybe one of them has family there, or they are tracing their roots. Who knows? Cybil doesn't have time to contemplate all the possibilities. Maybe if she tells Janae and Peter, if she says it out loud, it would make more sense.

But there is no way she could tell them that she is leaving America to chase her college friend, who they know next to nothing about and, Cybil realizes, she doesn't know as well either. How could she explain Candice to them? How much Cybil just wants to be near her? How lucky she counts herself that Candice should include her in her life, no matter how chaotic it is? She could give them the vacation story. She could make

up a place. Cybil closes her eyes and thinks while she is sitting on her sofa in front of the TV. She is watching the news, as always.

Cybil got in the habit of watching the news in college. She watched it occasionally before, but if Candice wasn't out at a "meeting" or protesting something, she was parked in front of their small, thirteen inch television to hear the latest. They were the first to hear about anything. Everyone came to their room to find out what was going on on campus as well as the rest of the world. Cybil knew when AIDS was discovered, Challenger had blown up and all about Chernobyl from watching CNN. She had become quite the cultured student from living with Candice. When they graduated and Candice went off the law school and Cybil started as an admin at FedEx, Cybil missed hearing the headlines. Candice had taught her so much; she wonders what Candice has learned from her.

"The tiny island nation of Jamaica, the biggest producer of marijuana in the Caribbean, is preparing 'industrial hemp,' which will not contain the psychoactive chemical found in marijuana." The news anchor says. "Preventive measures are in place to make sure the hemp remains 'untampered with.'"

That's it, Jamaica! Why not go to Jamaica? It's warm and beautiful. Jamaica is a great vacation spot. Would Janae or Peter believe her? Cybil picks up her cell phone and pushes the phone book button. She scrolls through the numbers, even though she could punch in *J* and get to Janae's number much quicker. Just as Cybil gets to Janae's number in her contact list, there is a knock at the door. Cybil gets up and opens the door to Candice's smiling face.

“You’re here.” Candice says, stepping inside in a pair of jeans and red shirt that wrapped around her upper body and tied on the left side.

Cybil closes the door behind her. Candice’s hair is clipped in an updo style, leaving her long, elegant neck, graced by a clear crystal necklace, exposed.

“I’ll go.” Cybil says.

“Good.” Candice smiles. Cybil hits the call button on her cell phone.

“I’m taking my vacation.” She says.

“Oh yeah? For a minute there, I was going to ask if I could have your days, since you never seemed to use them. So what are you going to do?”

“Going to Jamaica.” Cybil grins.

“Jamaica! The girl who never takes vacation is going to Jamaica! That sounds great!”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“So when are you leaving? We should give you a send-off party!”

“I’ll only be gone a week.” Cybil says.

There is a pause.

“So what made you decide to go?” Janae asks.

“Just need a change.”

“Well, good for you, Cybil! Take lots of pictures!”

Janae’s energy is contagious and encouraging. If only she were really going to Jamaica.

Cybil’s apartment phone rings.

“Hello.” She says into the receiver.

There is a loud click.

And then a dial tone.

Cybil replaces the phone on the cradle. Who is trying to call her? Maybe someone wants to make sure she is home. Cybil shakes her head and smiles at herself. That only happens in the movies. She's only spent one day with the guys and she's already paranoid. It could have been a legitimate wrong number. She picks up her cell phone and dials Peter's number.

He doesn't answer. As she is waiting for the beep to leave him a message, she hears a call waiting beep and clicks over to the other line.

"Is this Cybil Terry?" A male voice, not Peter's, asks.

"Yes." Cybil says quietly. Why is another man answering Peter's phone?

"Peter can't come to the phone right now. You two must be very close." The voice pauses. "I'm afraid something has happened that I think you should hear about in person."

"What happened?"

The words hit Cybil like a freight train. Candice comes into the room and Cybil looks at her blurry frame through tearful eyes.

"Peter Wiley was found dead early this morning in his apartment"

Candice becomes stiff. "What happened?"

"Did you know him?" The officer asks Candice, his face red with acne although he looked like he is at least in his early thirties.

"Only briefly." Candice says.

“Did he have any enemies?”

“No.” Cybil answers. “Everyone liked him.”

“If you think of anything.” The officer says giving Cybil his card. “I’m sorry.” He gets up and leaves. Cybil shuts the door behind him. Both women are silent for a moment. Cybil looks at Candice.

“Something’s going on.” Candice starts and then sits back on the couch. “This has got to connect somehow.”

“To your senator?” Cybil asks. She then tilts her head back, like she did when she talked to Peter. She imagines his short, red hair, brown eyes and pale skin that was red around his neck. He never buttoned the top button on any of his shirts. “What did you get yourself into?” She asks the created image.

“We’ve got to go to Ascension.” Candice says.

Why did Peter leave FedEx? If he had just stayed...

“We? Candice, if this is connected to your senator, then you could be...” Cybil can’t bring herself to say it. Candice eyebrows are raised and her eyes are glassy. Cybil wipes her cheeks.

“Hey, that’s not gonna happen.” Candice says scooting closer to Cybil. Cybil immediately feels her warmth as Candice puts her arm around Cybil’s shoulders. Her vanilla perfume makes Cybil sleepy. Although she has been crying, her eyes feel dry so she closes them as she leans on Candice’s shoulder.

“C’mon.” Candice squeezes Cybil’s shoulder. “We should tell the guys.”

“What is it with you and this ‘we’ business? You work for the senator, not me!” Cybil says louder than she intended.

“Any of us could be next.” Candice says, grabbing her purse.

“Who are these people?” Cybil asks.

“I don’t know, but we can’t wait around here for something else to happen.”

Candice says. “C’mon, get your stuff.”

“So what’s the plan?” Gary asks, as he, Josh, Robert, Candice and Cybil are sitting below deck. The sun is so intense that it is difficult to sit on deck for too long. It is humid below deck; the air feels like jello, but Cybil is used to it. It doesn’t feel too much different from Memphis in the summer time.

“If we find out who’s behind this Seabird Restoration Project, we may find out who killed Peter.” Candice says. “Derrick has a meeting with the Senate Finance Committee in two weeks. We gotta have this information to him by then.”

“Peter used to work in finance.” Cybil says. The guys look at her. She doesn’t know why she said that.

Part II: Ascension

Chapter 1

Y2K Bug beginning to cause concern

September 12, 1996

NEW YORK CITY, NY (CNN) – The Millennium, or Y2K bug, is arousing suspicion among business experts. They have reported that the bug, which will reportedly misdate important documents, may cost certain industries millions of dollars.

The group arrives on Ascension Island on Saturday morning. They flew to Nigeria. A fisherman who knows Derrick took them to Ascension. The air sets heavily on Cybil's shoulders as she walks ashore. The shore is sandy with large, black clumps of rocks that jut out from the ground that Cybil walks around. The island is quite drab. The water is the deepest shade of aquamarine Cybil has ever seen.

There is a road a few feet ahead, but no traffic. It is early in the morning and all that Cybil hears is the waves lapping the shore. The sand turns into larger rocks as they make their way towards the road. Walking over them with sand in her shoes, Cybil is very uncomfortable.

When they reach the road, Cybil realizes how narrow it is. She takes off her Keds and turns them upside down so that the sand will fall out. She looks around and sees all the rocks, though they got lighter the closer they were to the road.

“Where are we?” Cybil asks, letting her shoes drop from her hands. She then shoves her feet into them.

“The northern part of the island.” Cybil hears Candice say as she looks up at the power lines. Candice looks tanner, especially the outsides of her arms and her face and neck. Her skin, though, still looked perfectly blended and smooth like coffee.

A car drives by. Cybil imagines how the five of them must look, haggard and tan from a day at sea. She pushes the strap of her duffel bag up on her shoulder. She tried to pack as light as possible as Gary and Josh said, but her bag looked heavier than theirs. Cybil puts her hands in her pockets, feeling her passport she’s had since college as she follows Candice.

“Where are we going?” Cybil asks. She notices that the group has always answered her questions, although she has been the only one to ask.

“South of Traveller’s Hill.” Robert answers.

Where is that? Cybil wonders.

They cross the road and walk south.

As the sun is setting, Cybil sees some buildings in the distance. They have been walking since sometime that morning. Cybil looks at her watch, but she has no idea what time zone they are in. All she knows is that the sun is pretty much in the same place, just on the opposite side of the sky. The roofs are dark, but the front and sides look lighter. As they get closer, she makes out doors and windows. The landscape has brightened as well.

Robert told them that they were close to the mountains. The ground is higher and greener although the dirt is a dark brown as if it has been wet, but it isn't muddy. Cybil figures it must have rained recently.

As they get closer to the building, Cybil thinks it is a house. The siding on the house is a very light tan. There are wires attached to the side that run a few feet to a pole. She sees clothes clipped to the wires as they pass.

"This is it." Robert says. He walks up to the house and turns the door knob. It is locked.

"What is it?" Josh asks.

"Locked." Robert calls over his shoulder.

"Let me at it." Josh says moving towards the door. "Shouldn't be too hard." Josh leans his left shoulder into the door. Robert is hovering over him. Cybil and Candice stand furthest from the door. "Done." Josh says as he opens the door.

"Is this place empty?" Cybil asks, wondering out loud.

"Yep." Josh says from inside the house.

"How'd you do that, man?" Gary asks Josh, patting him on the shoulder.

"I wasn't always a school boy." Josh says.

"Alright guys, we made it. Get some rest." Candice says standing in the middle of the large room.

Cybil steps into the large room and sees counter space ahead. Must be the kitchen. There's a small stove and shelves up above. There is a hallway to the left. Cybil turns and walks down it to two smaller rooms about the same size. The floor is bare, concrete, but warm when Cybil takes her shoes off. She returns to the living room as Gary and Josh are

picking their places and rolling their jackets up to use as pillows. She runs her hand along the white, smooth walls.

Cybil lies on her back on the floor and stares up at ceiling, thinking there must be some unwritten rule that says that they can't all sleep in the same room. Candice and Robert sleep in the back. She is awake for what seems hours, wondering if someone is going to come home to this place. They are too far inland to hear the water, but Cybil hears a lot of birds flying around and chirping. When Cybil looked up the Ascension on the internet, the website said the island isn't very big. She remembers it covering about thirty miles. Her calves are tight; they must be somewhere in the center of the island.

Cybil is in a state between being awake and being asleep when she hears what sounds like a cat screeching. She opens her eyes and sits up. Green eyes stare back at her. There is a scream in her throat but it doesn't come out. The sound scurries to the kitchen. Cybil feels very uncomfortable on the floor after that.

The next morning the source of the screeching sound and green eyes is discovered. Josh picks up the rat with a towel and throws it outside.

"Is there food or something here?" Cybil asks, wondering what the rat was after.

"Just what we brought." Josh answers.

Later that day, Cybil walks into the unused bedroom and hears Gary, Josh, and Robert talking. She hears the last part of Robert's sentence as she enters.

"...the old NASA site, something's going on here."

All three of them turn around and there is awkward silence.

“What do you think really happened with the Apollo missions?” Josh asks no one in particular.

“How can you mess up that many times?” Gary asks. “I think America was in such a big rush to get into space that they didn’t know what the hell they were doing.” Gary pauses. “It’s called space for a reason; there’s nothing there!”

“NASA was just a way for the government to fund its nuclear program.” Josh says.

“Point well taken.” Robert nods.

Cybil sits down and listens to them talk.

“They tried to act like getting a man on the moon was a national priority, but it was only because the Russians beat us.” Josh says.

“But we were all about second strike capability.” Gary says.

Cybil laughs. She had heard this argument and similar ones from Candice all the time. The guys turn and look at her with their eyebrows raised.

“What?” Cybil looks at their faces. “Candice used to do this all the time.”

“How long have you known her?” Robert asks.

“Since college. I never heard the end of her debates.”

“So what do you think of NASA, man?” Josh asks Robert.

“I think NASA is made up of talented scientists that put a man on the moon. One of the greatest moments of the twentieth century.”

Gary and Josh look at Robert as if he just told them he is having a sex change operation. Then they begin to laugh, a little at first, but then their laughter becomes larger and deeper. Cybil begins to chuckle herself, thinking maybe they are starting to like her.

Chapter 2

Global warming will continue to raise Earth's temperatures

September 13, 1996

GAINSVILLE, Florida (CNN) – Climate experts at University of Florida predict another warm winter due to global warming trends. According to Dr. Ed Hall, the earth's climate is expected to rise two degrees every year.

Ascension is a small volcanic island with a subtropical climate. It rains a lot, especially from January to April. Although it was discovered by the Portuguese on Ascension Day, the British were the first to occupy the island. They built a navy base there called Ariane. Later, the U.S. built a base there and NASA also had a site on the island, but it's always been a British territory.

Cybil learns that Ascension is full of wildlife: turtles, all kinds of birds, and worse, rats and mice. They eat some of the dried food that they brought along and when Candice gets tired of it, she finds a market in Two Boats Village that sells fresh fruit, vegetables, rice, bread, and fish. She likes the idea of going to the market. It will give her a chance to explore the island, see what the guys are talking about. Although there are

other houses around, they have seen no one walking around outside until Cybil sees two girls drawing in the sand with a stick when she goes outside to take the garbage out.

There are two large cities: Georgetown, the capital located on the western coast and Two Boats, located in the center of the island slightly towards the east. The group settled outside of Traveller's Hill, a few miles south of Two Boats.

The village of Two Boats was named after these two boats that stick, head first, out of the ground right outside of the settlement. Near them is a huge market located underneath a canopy. There are vendors that sell bags and hats leading up to the market. Cybil buys a bag and enters the canopy.

Underneath, there are swarms of conversations, but the vendors' calls drown them all out. It is at least ten degrees cooler under the canopy and Cybil feels a chill run up her spine. Her cream colored, button down linen shirt, wet with sweat, clings to her frame and feels cool against her skin. The sun is hot and bright here.

"Two mangoes! Three pounds!" Cybil is startled by the woman vendor beside her. "You want mangoes?" She says to her, holding one out. Cybil hears a faint British accent, but there is something else in her voice.

Cybil walks to the table and takes the mango from the vendor's hands. She hands her another one. "Three pounds." Cybil pays her.

As Cybil is about to leave, she spots a vendor selling kitchen utensils. She approaches him and buys a pot, five bowls, five spoons, and a large chopping knife. As she stacks the bowls in the pot and lays the spoons down inside, she spots a man standing in front of the next table a few inches away from her.

“Need some help?” He asks, approaching her. He has emerald green eyes, clumpy blond hair and olive skin. He’s about average height and build, although to all of Cybil’s five feet and five inches, he seems tall.

Cybil has not thought about how she is going to carry all of these things. She thought she would think of something, but she hasn’t. She has mangoes, bananas, a pineapple, guavas, a bag of rice, two loaves of bread and a large pouch of tuna.

“Sure, thank you.”

“Where you headed?” Cybil hears a strong British accent in his voice.

“Traveler’s Hill.”

“Quite a walk.” He says ushering her from underneath the canopy.

They walk for a few minutes in silence.

“Name’s Basil.” He turns to her holding out his hand.

“Cybil.” She shakes his hand.

“Good to meet you, Cybil.” He adjusts the pot in his arms. “What brings you here to Ascension?”

Cybil doesn’t know what to say. “I’m here...”

“Oh, you must be with the Project.” He says.

“Yeah.” Cybil smiles although she has no idea what project he’s talking about.

“That’s great. They do bloody good work.” He pauses. “This place is so beautiful. It should be preserved this way.”

“Yeah.” Cybil says.

“You must be the errand girl.” Basil says, adjusting the pot in his arms.

“Gotta eat.” Cybil says.

“Do you usually go to the market on Mondays?”

Cybil thinks for a second. She is not sure what Candice would say, but maybe he could tell her if something is really happening here or not.

“If you do and if you usually buy this much stuff...”

Cybil stops and turns toward Basill, looking into his eyes. They remind her of Peter’s eyes, although his were brown. She looks away.

“Sure.” She says.

Chapter 3

KLA may attack again

September 14, 1996

KOSOVO, Serbia (CNN) – NATO and UN authorities are suspecting the KLA, the Kosovo Liberation Army, may be planning an attack on Serbian civilians in the near future. The KLA is a small band of migrant farmers and unemployed workers from Albania.

On Tuesday, three men appear at the door. They are dressed in black uniforms with gold buttons. They have shields pinned to their clothes. The one in the middle is the tallest and palest; the two on the end are both olive skinned with dark hair and eyes. The one in the middle talks the most.

“We need to see your entry papers.” He tells Candice. She turns to Robert.

“Can you go get those?”

“Not a problem.” Robert turns from the door and disappears down the long hallway.

“He’ll be back in a minute. I would invite you in, but we don’t have much.”

“That is quite alright, madam.” The middle officer says. Cybil thinks it sounds funny to hear Candice addressed as “madam.” Makes her seem old; then again, the stretching crows feet around her eyes is doing that for her.

“Cybil, do we have any more guava juice?” Candice asks, speaking over her shoulder.

“I’ll check.”

“Would you like some?”

“No, thank you.”

“Okay.” Candice continues to stand in the door frame. She then adjusts her weight and leans on the door for support. Robert finally returns.

“You know all we have back there is our copy of the papers, we sent the government copies to your office.” He says.

“We have no records for anyone staying here.” The middle officer says.

“Now, wait a minute, I distinctly remember going to the Administrator’s office. Do you remember that?” Robert asks Candice. Before she can respond, Robert continues. “I remember because we had just gotten here,” Robert motions to Candice, “and we were tired and sweaty and hungry, ya know, but I told...” Robert’s mouth remains open even though he stops speaking. “Judy, here, this is Judy,” Robert touches Candice’s arm, “that we had to file those papers as soon as we arrived. And she went on and on about how much her feet hurt, you know how women are.” Robert smiles at the officers. The one on the left smiles back.

“Yeah,” Candice chimes in, “it was really hot that day, wasn’t it, sweetie,” she looks at Robert. “We filed those papers fast so we could rest. This is such a beautiful, restful place.” Candice adds.

Hearing all of this from kitchen makes Cybil smile a nervous smile and laugh a nervous laugh. She’s has never been in any kind of trouble like this before. Where are Gary and Josh? Did they already take them? Did they give them up?

“We will check our records again.” The middle officer says. He motions to the other two to leave.

“Bye now.” Candice says in her best southern accent. She shuts the door. Cybil stands up. “What the hell was that?” she asks Robert, grinning. “Did you come up with that on the spot?”

“You couldn’t tell?” He says.

“Judy?”

“I came up with it on the spot.”

“It gives us a short time frame. Where are Gary and Josh? We gotta rethink our plans.”

“Yeah, we gotta do surveillance now.” Candice says.

Cybil wonders why the police visited them. Within two weeks, Cybil has been visited by authorities in two different countries. Maybe someone here did kill Peter.

Candice and Robert walk back to their room.

Although Ascension is very beautiful, there’s not much to do once it gets dark. With no TV or computer, one of the only ways to pass time is to read. Sometimes, Cybil

will cook some rice for tomorrow, but with the rats and mice around, she couldn't keep too much food out and definitely not on the floors.

Cybil wonders what there is to survey here. She's seen so few people around here. The most people she's ever seen have been at the market. She hears voices approaching the door and wonders if it is the officials coming to drag them away. Instead, it is Gary and Josh.

"He's gonna get it to me as soon as possible." Gary says opening the door and speaking over his shoulder.

"Yeah, we gotta get started." Josh says. "Hey, Cybil, what's up?"

Cybil exhales loudly. "You scared me."

"Sorry."

"Gary, Josh," Candice says, coming into the large front room followed by Robert. "We gotta talk."

"The equipment is coming." Gary says. "I just talked to the guy today. Said it should be here by the end of the week."

"Not good enough." Candice says.

"Consider where we are. It's not like he can just drop it off on his way home." Gary says.

"Listen, they know we're here." Candice says.

"How?" Josh asks. "I mean, there aren't a lot of people around."

"It doesn't matter. We gotta speed it up."

"We gotta get to the old NASA site, Ariane and check them out. We gotta find out about this Seabird Restoration Project." Robert says.

“NASA? NASA is involved, too?” Cybil asks.

“Cybil, when you went to the market, did you noticed anyone following you?”

Josh asks.

“What, no, everyone’s been pretty friendly.”

“Has anyone said anything to you?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Who?” Josh asks. They all look at her with intent eyes.

“Well, this guy helped me carry some stuff back..”

“Guy? What guy?” Candice asks.

“What’s his name?” Gary asks.

“Did you notice anything unusual about him?” Josh asks

Cybil looks around for a minute at all of their faces, leaning towards her.

“His name is Basil—” Cybil begins.

“Where did you see him?” Robert asks.

“Did he have anyone with him?” Gary asks.

“He’s blond and has a British accent. He was the only one. Umm...he looked like everyone else, I guess.”

“What do you know about him? Anything about his family...” Josh asks.

“He’s lived here all his life. Um...his father, or grandfather was stationed here, I can’t remember which. Why is all this so important?”

They all lean back. There is silence.

Cybil goes back to the market on Wednesday, looking for Basil. He must be someone important for the guys to be so worried about her talking to him. Cybil wishes she knew what the project is; it sounds like some biologists or something trying to preserve the island. She spots Basil outside the canopy.

“Hello.” She says.

“Back so soon?”

“I guess scientists have hefty appetites.” Cybil smiles. She walks under the canopy. They really have plenty of food. If Cybil buys too much, she is afraid the rats may get to it before they can eat it. She passes by the mango and banana table with Basil at her side.

“So what do you do?” Cybil asks, passing the guava table.

“I’m a journalist.”

“Ah, fellow writer.” Cybil says.

“You write as well?” Basil asks.

“In the States I was, or am, a Communications Specialist with Federal Express.”

“What do Communications Specialists do?”

“Write speeches.” Cybil says exiting the canopy, her bag empty.

“You haven’t bought much.” He observes.

“We didn’t need anything in there.” Cybil says. She automatically closes her eyes and swears to herself. There is no way Basil is going to buy that. Who goes to the market and buys nothing, especially when the other market is a couple of miles away?

Basil squints. “You didn’t come here to buy food.”

Cybil has been caught. “No, I didn’t, but neither did you.” She tries to rescue herself, but she didn’t think it is working. He didn’t buy anything when she met him either.

“What’s a writer have to do with the Project?”

“I have to go.” Cybil says. She really wants to leave before she ends up saying something to put the guys in jeopardy. She leaves Basil and head back to Traveller’s Hill, feeling his eyes following her.

Chapter 4

One of FBI's most wanted still at large

September 15, 1996

WASHINGTON, D.C. (CNN) – Thang Thanh Nguyen, who was indicted for killing his former employer on January 26, 1992, still remains at large and on the FBI's Most Wanted list. He was last arrested for unlawful flight by the FBI on July 14, 1992.

Cybil goes back to the market on Wednesday intrigued by Basil and finds a Wanted poster hanging up on the steel poles holding the canopy up. When she gets close enough to one, she reads it.

Wanted. Foreigners in Traveller's Hill. Will compensate anyone with information.

Cybil's takes small steps around the market in order to avoid falling. She doesn't see Basil anywhere.

When she gets back to the house, she opens the door easily. They always keep it open, seeing as they have almost no belongings. No one else is there.

Did those officers come and get them? Did someone turn them in?

Cybil sets the bag on the kitchen counter. She is not sure what she is supposed to do until they come back. *If* they come back. Although it is about four o'clock, the time they usually eat dinner, Cybil can't bring herself to cook any rice.

Candice comes in the door hurriedly and closes it behind her. Is someone chasing her?

“Candice, where have you been? Where is everyone else?”

“They’re not here?” Candice asks

“Oh, no.” Cybil’s heart sinks to her stomach.

“What, did something happen?” Candice asks.

“There are signs up at the market. They’re looking for us!” Cybil blurts out.

“What signs?”

“I saw Wanted signs at the market today.”

“What did they say?”

“They called us foreigners!” Cybil is on the verge of tears.

“Hey, c’mon.” Candice says, walking up to Cybil.

Josh walks in.

“Where’s Gary and Robert?” Candice asks Josh.

“Last I heard Gary was going to check on the equipment and Robert checking out the old NASA site. Why, what’s up?”

“We’ll talk later. There are Wanted posters up at the market.” Candice says.

“That was fast.” Josh says.

“Listen, Cyb, governments do this all the time, it’s nothing to worry about. Just trying to scare people.”

“Oh yeah, people will be so paranoid they’ll be turning in their neighbors just because they haven’t seen them in a couple of hours. It’ll take days for them to process all of this.” Josh says.

“Plus, we don’t know how much they know. They may be just bluffing.” Candice says. “They’re toying with us. If they really wanted us gone, they would have done it already. That’s why we need to be here. Something is going on.”

“I got some info from the library today.” Josh says.

“We’ll talk as soon as everyone gets here.”

“What’s for dinner?” Josh asks, although they have been eating rice and tuna since their dried food ran out.

Cybil has almost forgotten that there is a meal to prepare. She’s not quite convinced by Candice’s arguments. After all, Gary and Robert still aren’t here. She wonders how they can be so unconcerned. Cybil mechanically pours some rice into the pot, runs some water over it until she is tired of hearing it spew from the faucet and sets the pot on the stove.

Gary and Robert come in within a few minutes of each other.

“We gotta talk.” Gary says with a smile on his face.

“Equipment?” Josh asks when he notices Gary is empty-handed.

“Maybe tomorrow.” Gary says.

The rest of the group, except for Cybil, sighs loudly.

“Hey, it’ll get here when it gets here.” Gary says.

“So I was at the library today,” Josh begins. They all sit down on the floor. “And this restoration project is the big cheese around here. It’s funded by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and supported by the Ascension government and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. I would go on about the programs specs but that’ll just bore you, so I looked at recent press coverage of this thing. There’s a story about one

of the scientists, a Dr. Cook, written by a Basil Montgomery.” Josh stops, seeming pleased with himself.

The others look surprised.

“What does this mean?” Cybil asks, confused by the silence.

“Means anything you haven’t told us about your friend Basil we gotta know now.” Gary says.

“I’ve told you everything. He wasn’t at the market today, so I didn’t talk to him.”

“He may have been around here today,” Robert says. “Did anything look different to you when you came in?” He asks those who were there before him.

They shake their heads no.

“We gotta start checking for bugs. This may not be a safe place to discuss, but we really don’t have anywhere else to go.” Robert says as Cybil gets up to check the rice.

“Our enemy has a face.” Candice says.

“We can’t focus on him. We gotta do what we came here to do.” Gary says.

“What’d you find out at the NASA site?” He asks Robert.

“It’s pretty dead around there, but there was some trash around the place that looked pretty recent. It could be that people put their trash there, but I gotta dig deeper.”

“We gotta do like we did today,” Candice says. “We can’t go anywhere together. Groups arouse suspicion. Return like we did today.”

“Let’s work at night.” Josh says.

Chapter 5

Will Whitewater hurt Clinton's chances of reelection?

September 16, 1996

WASHINGTON, D.C. (CNN) – Political analysts have noted that current president Bill Clinton will have to overcome the Whitewater scandal and show Americans that he is trustworthy in order to win another term. Whitewater, a scandal dating back to Clinton's term as governor of Arkansas, involved the misplacement of real estate funds and corrupt business dealings in the 1970s and 80s.

The guys stay up all night all in the large front room. Cybil tries to stay awake, but she drifts off to sleep to the rhythm of Gary, Josh, and Robert's endless fact checking. She has gotten used to the island and her almost daily treks to the market are wearing her out.

Cybil wakes up in the morning to find Gary, Josh, and Robert asleep. She drinks some guava juice for breakfast. She thinks of how much easier her life would be if she were still in Memphis. With everyone asleep, the house is silent, but not like her apartment in Memphis. Here, the birds never stop flying or chirping. The air always smells like seawater. In Memphis, you didn't have to smell the Mississippi unless you were downtown. And then, the river always smelled like rotten food. Even though she likes Ascension, she is beginning to miss Memphis, especially the variety of food. She

has nothing to look forward to here, but more rice. Cybil thinks she saw some pasta at the market the last time she went. It would be a welcome change.

Cybil begins cleaning. There is a bag of banana peels that needs to be thrown away. There really isn't a place for their trash. She thought about asking the girls she saw a few days ago, but she hasn't seen them since. On her way out, she could walk to the market. She can't stay cooped up in here all day. Maybe she could do some surveillance of her own, find Basil and what his connection to this Project is.

On the way to the market, there is a small boy who looks no more than ten years old handing out some papers. He hands one to Cybil. She stops as she reads it.

The Administrator has seized the records of the Seabird Restoration Project.

Cybil remembers Josh saying that the Project was supported by the Administrator. Why would he be seizing their records; would he have access to them already? Cybil puts the paper in her bag. She looks up and sees Basil in front of her. She walks up to him.

"Kinda cloudy today." Cybil says.

"Looks like a storm's coming." Basil says. "We should go inside." He ushers into a deli by the market.

"Can't say I've ever noticed this place before." Cybil says, sitting down.

"Great place to people watch. Observe." Basil says and then leans in. "I know you're not with the project."

Cybil feels small stabbing pains in her chest. "How did you know?"

“When you left here yesterday you were walking east, the Project is west of here.”

Basil swallows. “The way you’ve been coming around here tells me you must want to know something.”

“Why did the Administrator seize the Project’s records?” Cybil has decided to be blunt.

“Who’s asking?”

“A writer.”

Basil thinks for a second. “Not good enough.” He lifts himself up from his chair.

“Wait, I know about the money.” Cybil says the first thing that pops in her head. She wanted to say something shocking enough to make Basil stay. He sits back down.

“What money?”

Cybil wants to ask him who he is working for, but she figures she better answer his question before he will tell her anything about himself.

“The stolen money.” She tries to remember what she has heard from Candice and the guys. “That goes through the Project.”

“How do you know about that?”

“You have to answer something for me now.” Cybil tries to wipe the smile off her face and be as serious as possible. “Who do you work for?”

“The Islander, naturally. It’s the only paper here.”

Cybil feels foolish. “Well, how do you know about the money?”

“You said you were from the States. Did someone send you here?”

“I came on my own.” Cybil says.

Basil sighs. “The U.S., through the IMF, and the British have been laundering money through here. Supposedly some senator in the U.S. found out about it, so they were going to wipe him out, but they couldn’t find him.”

“Who is ‘they’?” Cybil asks.

“I don’t know.” Basil says, looking away. Cybil doesn’t trust this remark. “So they ended up killing one of his staff, some new guy, poor devil.”

New guy? Peter? Cybil suddenly feels tears welling up in her eyes.

“I have to go.” She says getting up and dashing outside. Luckily, it has just began to rain so her tears will be concealed.

It is still raining when Cybil gets back to Traveller’s Hill. The guys are still asleep. Cybil is happy that she doesn’t have to explain where she’s been or what she just learned. Cybil walks around them and begins boiling the pasta she found at the market. When she set out for the market, she was excited about the pasta, but now she doesn’t think the guys will even notice.

There is a knock at the door. Cybil answers it as Gary and Josh sit up and wipe their eyes, stretch, and yawn. The same three officers stand on the porch of the house. Cybil doesn’t know what to say.

“Who are you? Where is the couple we talked to before?”

“I’ll get them.” Cybil says walking away from the door. She is more than happy to let Candice and Robert handle this. She walks down the hall to their room.

“Candice.”

“What?” Candice asks, without opening her eyes.

“The officers are back.”

Candice immediately opens her eyes and sits up. She punches Robert. He jerks awake. “They’re back.”

“Who?”

“The officers. Remember?”

“Oh, oh yeah.” Robert pulls himself up to a sitting position. “We better go say something.” Robert gets up and walks sleepily to the front room. Candice follows with Cybil behind her.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“It’s really raining.” Candice says, noticing the wetness of the officers’ clothes.

“We have found no papers for you. You are not allowed here without entry papers from the Administrator. Gather your things. We will escort you to the airport.” The middle one says.

What papers, Cybil wonders.

“Still didn’t find them? Well, maybe this is just a misunderstanding,” Robert says.

“How about we go down to the Administrator’s office first thing tomorrow and file, I mean re-file, those papers?”

“Oh you men,” Candice stands beside Robert. “Always losing things. This one,” she points to Robert, “has to ask me where everything is. ‘Honey, have you seen my dress socks?’ or ‘Honey, where’s the Oreo’s I bought yesterday?’”

Cybil can’t help but smile at the domestic routine Candice and Robert are putting on, but it must look funny since there are three other people in the room with them.

“You must leave.” The middle officer steps forward towards Robert.

“Hey, listen.” Robert says pushing him gently back to his place. “Listen, I can clear this up now. Give me a sec.” Robert walks briskly back to the bedroom and comes back with a roll of paper. “Here. 1000 pounds. That should take care of any trouble.” He pauses while the officer stares at it as if Robert just gave him a dead rat. “It’s all there.”

Where did Robert get 1000 pounds? Cybil wonders. There’s no way he could be a trail lawyer making that kind of money. Maybe he gets money from Derrick.

‘I’m sorry for any trouble we’ve put you through.’ Candice says.

“Have a good night.” The middle officer says, although the officer on the right looks worried. Robert shuts the door after them.

Candice exhales loudly. “Is that the last of our money?”

“Almost. We may need to ask Derrick to send us more.”

There is silence as Candice puts her hands on her hips, looks down at the floor, and shakes her head from side to side.

Cybil remembers the paper she got from the boy at the market and her conversation with Basil. Knowing them, the guys probably already knew about the headline, but should she tell them what Basil told her? They always seemed to pick up on things faster than she did. Why even bring it up? Maybe this was her time to withhold information.

“Well, can’t cry over spilt milk.” Gary says. He’s awake enough to lift himself off the floor. “As we’ve said before, we don’t have a lot of time.”

Chapter 6

Suspect identified in bank robbery

September 17, 1996

JACKSON, Tenn (CNN) – Authorities have identified a suspect that is believed to be involved in the Union Planter's bank robbery last week. He has been seen on camera entering the bank with his hand in his left pocket.

Cybil figures the first time the officers came, the whole island knew about it the next day, so she decides to go to a different market on Friday. Maybe she won't be spotted at the market in Georgetown. It is further away, all the way on the west coast, so she leaves earlier than normal.

The air is thick with water as Cybil walks to the market in Georgetown. There are several, large canopies and she can hear the vendors shouting from a few feet away. Cybil walks under the canopy and realizes that the Georgetown market is set up opposite of the one in Two Boats. The mango table is not the first one to the left of the entrance, but instead it is the first table in the back. The banana table is first.

As Cybil is reaching into her pocket for some pound notes, she overhears a conversation at the next table.

"You hear about those people at Traveller's Hill?" A man says.

“Oh, yeah, I try to keep away from there.” Another man replies.

“What’s wrong with Traveller’s Hill?” The vendor asks.

“It’s in the paper. Bloody people there have been paying people off to not say anything.” The first man says.

“When I came here, I had to get my paper cleared just like everybody else.” The second man says.

Cybil assumes that these people are islanders. She can’t listen to any more. She pays for the bananas and leaves. She is unsure whether she wants to read the article the people were talking about at the market, but something compels her to buy a paper. She sees the headline on the front page.

Possible Criminals on the Island? ‘Visitors’ reportedly bribed local authorities and have performed other questionable acts.

Although Cybil wants to drop the paper on the ground, something compels her to keep it. She tightens her grip on the paper as if it were an unwilling child. She doesn’t think Basil would be here; she looks around, but doesn’t see him.

When Cybil gets back to Traveller’s Hill, the group is still asleep. It’s about four, which means dinner time. Cybil wonders how they can sleep so peacefully knowing that they are wanted criminals. Gary and Josh look like large lumps on the floor, covered in blankets. She can barely discern the lumps rising and falling and has to watch very closely to make sure they are breathing. They usually wake up when Cybil starts cooking.

Josh wakes up first.

“This all we got?” He asks, taking out the bunch of bananas Cybil bought earlier that day.

“You won’t believe this,” She starts, pressing the newspaper to Josh’s chest.

“Man, they certainly put a spin to things.” Josh says, skimming the article over.

“Guess they learned from the best.”

“They could be here any minute!” Cybil says, causing Gary to stir in his sleep.

“What’s going on?” Gary mumbles.

“We’re wanted criminals!” Josh announces.

Gary sits up.

“What’s this ‘other questionable acts’?” Cybil asks.

“What’s all the racket?” Robert stumbles sleepily into the large front room with Candice behind him.

“Yeah, what are you guys so excited about?” Candice asks.

“This!” Josh says, holding up the paper like a child holds up his artwork.

Robert takes the paper from Josh and reads. “Ah, criminals!” He hands the paper to Candice.

“Criminals?” Gary says getting up and walking towards Robert. He reads over Candice’s shoulder. “Interesting choice of words, as always.”

“What will they do to us?” Cybil asks. If these are the same people who killed Peter...

“Look, this is just like I said before. This kind of thing happens all the time.” Candice says.

“We know more about them than they know about us.” Gary says. “Here, let me show you.” Gary motions for Cybil to follow him. The rest of the group follows Cybil.

“See, state of the art.” Gary says, as they enter the unused room. There are cameras and black briefcases and duffel bags on the floor. So this was the equipment Gary was talking about.

“We got cameras, bugs, night goggles, the works.” Josh says.

“In light of the piece of imaginative writing in the paper, I think we gotta lay low for a while.” Robert says.

“Don’t be a killjoy.” Josh says.

“Just being real. I mean, Derrick is depending on our findings, we gotta be careful.” The group, except for Cybil, turn to look at him. “Just cover yourselves, you know, when we go out.”

“I think Robert has a point, we gotta show little signs of life. If we lay low for a while until this whole thing blows over...”

“If they report it again, people are less likely to believe it.” Gary says. “It’ll get to the point that the paper will say ‘there are criminals here’ and people will just laugh. We’ll be natives.”

“Derrick’s contact in Nigeria might be able to help us.” Robert says. “He got us here. He could get us some food. That way, we wouldn’t have to go back to the market.”

“Our phone,” Gary twists around and looks at a case with a phone in it, “isn’t that great, but I think it will work.”

“During the day, no one moves. Don’t even sneeze.” Gary says. “We may have to start working later at night, when we’re sure everyone is asleep. Like midnight to around five a.m.”

“That’ll work, man.” Josh says.

“Everyone’s gotta sleep.” Gary says, looking at Cybil.

Cybil is in too far to say no.

Chapter 7

Worse suicide bomb to date explodes in Ramallah

September 18, 1996

RAMALLAH, West Bank (CNN) – A deadly suicide bomb exploded in Ramallah earlier today killing over 150 people. Rescue workers are still digging bodies out of the wreckage.

When officials come back for the third time, Cybil knows that she has to do something.

“We are not asking nicely.” The officer says. “You must leave in twenty-four hours.” Cybil wonders what happened to the other three that came before. This officer is here alone.

Cybil is once again in the kitchen while the officer is talking to Candice and Robert.

When Candice shuts the door, Cybil says. “I think we should do what he says.”

The guys all turn to look at her.

“Obviously, they still know we’re here.” Cybil says.

“Listen, we can’t leave until the job is done.” Gary says.

“If something happens...” Cybil starts.

“The only thing that’s gonna *happen* is we are going to finish what we started.”

Gary says. “Take it from us; we’ve all been here before.”

Candice? Candice has been a wanted woman? Cybil looks around at all their faces. They stare back in confirmation.

“I don’t feel comfortable...” Cybil says.

“I *told* you!” Gary looks at Josh. “I *told* you we couldn’t trust her!”

Cybil jumps at the outburst.

“Wait, wait!” Candice calls. “You know we gotta keep it down.” She tells Gary. He begins to pace the room.

“Look Candice, we are not here for you.” Gary says. “We’re here for Derrick.”

“Cool it, bro.” Josh says.

“I am not your bro!” Gary says. He realizes that he has raised his voice again and takes a deep breath. “All I’m saying is I got the stuff, the sooner we get done, the sooner we can leave. You guys know we’re on the edge of something. We got a way in with Basil...”

“Which if it wasn’t for *Cybil*, we wouldn’t have.” Candice adds.

Cybil nervously pushes her hair behind her left ear.

“She’s gonna cost us.” Gary says. “If she leaves, what’s gonna stop her from squealing?”

“First of all, Cybil is not going to ‘squeal,’ okay? She’s not like that. And second of all, she’s right here, you don’t have to talk like she’s not here!”

“Why’d you invite her?” Josh asks.

There is silence as Candice shifts her weight and puts her hand on her hip. Cybil tries to swallow, but she realizes her mouth is dry.

“I think I speak for everyone here.” Gary says.

“Hey, I speak for me.” Josh says. “I’m just asking a simple question. Why’d you invite her?”

Robert looks at Candice. She takes a deep breath.

“She found my notes.”

“What? Candice...” Robert starts.

“There would have been more of a chance of her telling if she’d have stayed.”

Candice says. “I had to tell her.”

“Thought you said she wouldn’t squeal?” Josh says.

“Listen, like it or not, she’s—”

“Stop it! Just stop it!” Cybil blurts out. “I came to find out what happened to Peter!” She takes a few steps away from the group. “You guys talk about telling the truth.”

They group all turns and looks at Cybil.

“He was killed by accident!” Cybil screams.

“What are you talking about?” Candice asks.

“Basil told me. Instead of your senator, it was Peter!”

“Cybil, when did you talk to Basil?”

“She’s been snooping behind our backs. I thought we were all together on this?”

Gary asks.

“I wish I would have just left the notes alone. Then maybe...maybe all of this would have never happened.” Cybil is almost whispering now.

“Alright, how is this going to work?” Josh asks after some silence. “How we gonna do this if we’re not all in?”

“I can *tell you* how it’s gonna work.” Gary says. “Let Cybil go if she wants, but only after she tells us everything. And Candice has got to keep her in check.”

“What?” Candice says. “I’m here for the same reason you guys are.”

“The job’s been comprised.” Josh says. “How much can we get done here?”

“But you know,” Robert says. “If we leave now, it may be even harder to come back. They may be looking for us next time, so we’d have to be really careful.”

“Naw, we’ve got something here. I’m not paying for someone else’s mistake.” Gary says looking at Candice.

“Alright, look.” Candice says. “Let’s just talk about this tomorrow, when we’ve all had a chance to cool down.”

“Oh no, before we can move on, we’ve got to assess this situation. It can’t take away from the job anymore.” Gary says. “So what do you guys say?” Gary asks Robert and Josh.

“I think he’s got a point.” Josh says.

Gary and Josh look at Robert.

“Look man, I know you like hitting it and all,” Gary says, “but you gotta use the right head here.”

“Gary! Jeez!” Candice says.

Gary continues to stare Robert down. Then he turns to Josh.

“What do you think, man?”

Josh exhales loudly. “Kinda like it here. I’d like to stay. We gotta go back with something.”

“Robert?” Gary asks. Candice, Josh, and Cybil look at Robert.

Robert puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels.

“We shouldn’t hold Cybil here against her will.”

“What? Robert?” Candice turns and looks at Robert with wide eyes. “What are you saying?”

Robert looks back at her.

“Just tell me.”

“I think it would be better if you sit this one out.”

Candice shifts her gaze from Robert to Josh to Gary.

“So that’s what you all think? You think I’m not dedicated?” Candice pauses.

“You think I don’t want results?” Another pause. “I hope Derrick likes what you have to say.”

Candice leaves the room. Cybil quickly follows her. She knows she would feel awkward, staring at the guys without anything to say for herself. Candice sits on the floor of the room in a corner with her back towards the door. Cybil sits beside her.

“I can’t believe they would do that.” Candice says, trying to control the wilting in her voice. She then looks at Cybil with glassy eyes. “I’m glad you’re here, Cyb.” Candice wipes her eyes. Candice is in sweats, but she never looked better. Her skin is a touch darker, more cinnamon colored than it was before. The sun has lightened her hair to a

dark brown. “Guess I should contact Derrick, let him know I’m coming back.” She gets up and walks to the equipment room. Cybil hears her conversation. She is shouting.

“It’s Candice, I’m coming back...I’ve got information...”

Candice comes back in the bedroom. “We’re leaving tomorrow. First thing.”

“Who were you talking to?” Cybil asks.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Damnit Candice!” Cybil shouts. Candice jumps. “You brought me here. The least you can do is tell me the truth. This was never about another bombing in America was it?”

“No.” Candice sighs. “Although what I told you I believe. It was just about the money.”

“You gotta believe me Cybil.”

“I don’t know if I can, Candice. I mean, in college, nothing was serious, but now I’m in a foreign country. How long are you going to keep doing this? Next time, leave me out, okay? Don’t call me, don’t tell me anything.” As soon as Cybil says this, she feels a tightness in her chest. She couldn’t have met this. “If I can’t believe you, how can you and I be friends?”

“What are you saying, Cyb?”

“I just can’t be associated with this, these ideas and people.”

The next day, Candice and Cybil flew from Ascension to London. As they are walking towards the international gates, Cybil notices that Candice is not ahead of her like she normally is.

“C’mon, Cyb, let’s go this way.”

“But my gate is this way.” Cybil points in the opposite direction.

“Don’t go back to Memphis.” Candice says.

“Candice I can’t keep doing this. Did you not hear me last night?” Cybil asks.

“What are you going to do there, bask in Peter’s memory?”

“That is not fair.”

“You know I’ve always needed you with me.”

Whatever words Cybil had in her throat have stopped. “What about the information for Derrick?”

“You are better at this than you think, better than me even.” Candice sighs, looks down, and then up into Cybil’s eyes. “You have the information.”

Against her better judgment, Cybil follows Candice to her gate.